



Getting to It!

Accomplishing the Important, Handling the Urgent, and Removing the Unnecessary

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

From the authors of *Juggling Elephants* comes the only guide you need to sort through the many priorities of your life, know what your IT (Important Thing) should be, and understand how to get IT done.

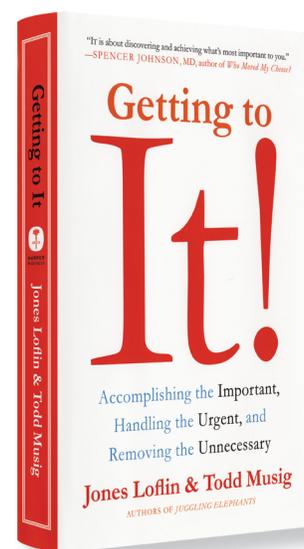
How busy are you? Is your mind constantly racing through lists of all the things you could and should be doing? Does your day often feel as though you're treading water in an ocean of rushes and deadlines, trying to keep from drowning while handling the increasing demands of your work and life?

Don't give up — help is on the way. You just have to find your IT. The Important Thing. Define IT. Plan IT. Focus on IT. Get excited about IT.

Identifying IT isn't just the first step in the process of getting focused and heading in the right direction: it's every step. *Getting to It* provides the necessary tools to accomplish the important, handle the urgent, and get rid of the unnecessary. Want to enjoy a more fulfilling life? Get to IT.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to recognize when you're working too hard on the wrong things.
- How to devote your physical, mental and emotional resources to getting what is important done.
- How to better evaluate where you're spending your time and energy.
- How to set yourself up to achieve more success at work and in your personal life.
- How to work on and accomplish your most important things.
- How to get those you work with on board with your goals.
- How to say "yes" to what is important and "no" to what is not.



by Jones Loflin
and Todd Musig

CONTENTS

Defining IT

Page 2

Believing IT

Page 4

Communicating IT

Page 4

Planning for IT

Page 4

Doing IT

Page 5

Working with Others on IT

Page 8

Wrapping IT Up

Page 8

THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: GETTING TO IT!

by Jones Loflin and Todd Musig

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For additional information on the authors, go to www.summary.com or www.gettingtoit.com.

What Is IT?

In Your Struggle to Get It All Done, What's Not Getting Done?

It's possible that other people already admire you as someone who has it all together. Do you privately wonder how much longer you can maintain your pace and your reputation for always delivering on time? Are you often merely getting by rather than thriving, hoping that something (other than retirement or winning the lottery) will come along to rescue you from this stormy ocean of hurry, deadlines, and the constant juggling act of balancing never-ending work and life demands?

There is a solution to help get you focused and pointed in the right direction. In a word: IT. *Of everything you could do in the next moment, IT is the most important thing.*

The problem, you tell yourself, isn't in deciding what must be done; often circumstances or other people have made those decisions for you. The problem is in all the steps required to accomplish a number one priority.

Constantly stepping back and analyzing what's driving your choice of IT is more than just a useful exercise; it's critical. Clarity of thought and purpose is necessary not only in determining IT; it's essential to efficiently organizing all the steps required to accomplish IT.

So where do you begin?

Types of ITs and the Need to Identify Them

There are ITs that make you want to get out of bed in the morning and ITs that make you want to hide under the bedcovers all day.

Long-term ITs might range from your lifetime achievements to goals that require only a year or two to accomplish. Short-term ITs are goals you want to accomplish in six months to a year. Daily ITs are the "here and nows." Most often, they're in competition with a thousand other demands on your time and energy.

When you identify your IT for any period of time, you start a process of planning to make IT successful.

But without a well-conceived plan for how you're going to spend your time, almost anything can arise to distract you from what you really want to accomplish.

The question for you is, "What price are you paying for allowing things of lesser importance to dominate your schedule instead of spending more time on those you care most about?" ●

Defining IT

Define IT or Everything Else Will Define You

How do you narrow the list and define what IT is for you? The process we suggest consists of five steps:

1. Stop what you're doing for a moment.
2. Review your funnel.
3. Evaluate your possibilities.
4. Use your filters.
5. Develop plans to say no to everything that's not IT.

A key challenge for people with too much to do is that they are overwhelmed with so many potential activities that they don't know where to start or how to determine what should or shouldn't get done.



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Summary: GETTING TO IT!

The typical solution is just to tackle the task that is most convenient or enjoyable and work as long and as fast as possible, or focus on the task that is screaming the loudest for attention.

Let your first IT be to stop.

Reviewing Your Funnel

The narrow neck of a funnel demonstrates the limiting effect of time and resources on our ability to tackle potential tasks or activities. It's important to remember that only so much can be done to increase the flow of tasks that actually get completed; there are only so many hours in the day.

Our mental funnel does the initial work of helping us determine what gets done. With a universe of possibilities flowing into our finite funnels, there's a limit to what can flow out. Pour too much liquid into a funnel, and it overflows. The actions we know are important are displaced by those that seem urgent or unnecessary. Just because something forces its way into your schedule does not make it important.

Even with impossible demands, we often say, "I'll see what I can do." Then the task of determining whether the seemingly impossible is really impossible becomes just another item in the funnel.

A strong understanding of what you have done to let tasks enter your funnel prepares you for the next step in the process: filtering what makes it through the funnel to become IT.

Evaluating Your Possibilities

You already employ some mental filters as you determine what possibilities become IT for you. Mental filters used to define IT can be positive or negative. Negative filters can come in the form of harmful attitudes that limit you from undertaking tasks for poorly examined reasons, such as assuming you're too old, not educated enough, too poor or not handsome enough.

When evaluating your possibilities, be prepared to search out the negative filters you might have in place that prevent you from making room for activities, attitudes, dreams and goals that would actually enhance or improve your life.

More recognizable are the positive benefits of filters. There are moral filters, safety filters, social norms, religious principles, and filters you have developed over time based on your unique wisdom and understanding.

There are also practical filters that can limit or enhance your ability to get things done, such as resources or lack of resources and your health.

Using Your Filters

Your goal with filters is to line up your options to ensure an orderly flow through your funnel so you have clearly defined ITs. Being conscious of your filters ensures that you won't make choices haphazardly.

Generally, the key to refining your choices to the optimum IT is to be proactive and strategic rather than reactive and tactical.

To get what is *most* important, you might need to employ some "tactical prioritization." With a tactical filter, you're looking at the immediate situation and environment around you and making frequent adjustments.

Take time to ask yourself these questions:

- What deadlines are approaching?
- As an employee, what priorities are set for me (either documented or implied) by my organization?
- How much time do I have to devote to the ideal goal right now?
- What is the one action I could take today — this hour — that would get me an inch closer to accomplishing my most important goals?
- What is the one obstacle that needs to be removed before I can make progress toward the ultimate goal?
- What is the one conversation or discussion I should have with someone that would help me (and possibly others) clarify what is most important?

Commit to selecting your goal carefully and consciously and then choosing courses of action that align with the goal. Invest the time it takes to identify fully what is most important in the long run and also what is most important right now to move you in the straightest possible line toward that goal.

Choosing your IT wisely and being willing to say no to things that matter and instead saying yes to that which matters most can make a difference.

Scope creep is a common challenge in many organizations and a prime example of the need to have the right filters in place. You are assigned a project with specific outcomes, but as you begin to complete each element of the project successfully, the scope is broadened, more tasks are added, and it's now grown beyond you or your team's ability to accomplish with any degree of excellence. Having (and communicating) the filters that prompt you to resist adding new tasks to this project is critical.

There will always be more possibilities in your funnel than you can ever hope to complete. Ultimately, you will have to say no to the possibilities recommended by others that don't align with your filters. ●

Believing IT

You Know What You Believe About IT, But Do You Believe What You Know?

Regardless of the scale of your IT, a firm conviction that IT can be done is crucial to staying on track. You can reinforce this conviction by doing the following:

- Confirm your commitment of time and energy.
- Engage your heart.
- Remove the “Four Ns.”
- Visualize the eventual benefits.

Whatever IT is, IT rarely gets accomplished without the willpower to make IT a reality. Without the involvement of your heart, you might quickly be overwhelmed with countless reasons why you can't possibly succeed at IT.

To maintain your belief in IT, you must eliminate as much as possible of the negativity you're likely to encounter. The most prevalent negative thoughts typically stem from fear.

If it's the fear of failure, find someone who has accomplished something similar, and learn from him or her. If it's the fear of risking financial loss, counter it with rational measures to minimize the potential downside — what financial managers call “hedgies.” If it's the fear of not having enough time, go back and review your filters. Also, think about other items on your schedule that you could delegate, delay or delete to make more room for IT.

The key is to focus on completing IT. The more your capacity is occupied with positive thoughts and possibilities, the less room there will be for your mind to engage in negative thinking.

The mental strength needed to accomplish IT is available to you if you have a positive attitude. Once you master the skill of keeping a positive attitude, you'll naturally be looking forward to the benefits of accomplishing IT: “We're going to get this marketing plan implemented, and then I can have my life back!” Visualize those benefits. Find words to describe what your situation will be like when you accomplish IT. Stick with positive words like clarity, peace, fulfillment and relief. Draw on the power of visualization.

Believing you can accomplish what is most important to you simply means that you know that the joy, satisfaction, peace or reward that comes from accomplishing IT is worth far more than merely allowing the possibility to stay indefinitely in your funnel or get forced out by a million other things. Allow yourself to make the journey. Believe IT can happen. ●

Communicating IT

Many Are the Plans and Few Are the Successes of the Person Who Has Dreams but Tells No One

Communicating the most Important Thing you're working on to those who have (or should have) a great interest in IT's success can be a crucial part of the process. Communicating your values, goals and activities builds a framework of support that helps you in your quest to achieve what is most important to you.

Communicating a goal, project plans, or an intended change in attitude, work habits or behavior allows other people to assist you when you need help. They can provide resources, serve as a sounding board, give encouragement, or even offer ideas.

Your ability to communicate your vision and passion is what will convince them of IT's importance and your level of commitment.

Remember that communicating IT warns others that things will change not only for you but for them as well. As you plan your communication, ask yourself these questions:

- What's in IT for them?
- Why should they be excited about IT for me?
- Why should they be excited about IT for themselves?

You might need to accept accountability and tolerate some pressure once you've announced your goal to others, especially if there's a deadline involved.

You might see the attention of others as pressure, but bear in mind there are two kinds of stress: eustress (positive) and distress (negative). Whether that pressure comes from within yourself or you're aware of people monitoring whether you're going to make your goal, you have the option of viewing whatever stress you encounter as eustress, pressure that drives you forward to your goal.

Your willingness to share your own story about achieving IT despite daunting odds can encourage others to have confidence that their own IT is achievable. ●

Planning for IT

ITs Rarely Scream at Us. They Wait Patiently Behind Everything Else

Individuals and organizations often develop elaborate plans to improve their attitudes, income and prospects for future performance, but then they fail to follow through on the plan. What determines success or failure is both a plan and the execution of that plan.

Summary: GETTING TO IT!

As you plan to accomplish IT, consider other priorities already on your schedule for the year, month or week ahead. The big question to answer is, “How do I accomplish IT given the commitments I already have in place?”

Consider the obstacles and limitations likely to impede your progress. Make a list! It may be finances: How are you going to pay for IT? Personnel: Do you have the right people in place, and do they share your commitment? For whatever roadblocks and speed bumps you can anticipate, prepare workarounds and alternate routes.

Determine Milestones

Simply put: What do you want to accomplish, and by when? People identify their IT but then let time pass until IT is no longer relevant. Here are two suggestions to keep in mind when setting milestones on the way toward completing IT.

- Set a deadline. Pick a date for completion, and then plan backward, determining as realistically as possible how much time will be allocated for each step along the trajectory to reaching that deadline. If the time required by all the steps added together extends well beyond your deadline, ask yourself whether it’s possible for several subprojects to proceed in parallel, or put your imagination to work coming up with unconventional but workable shortcuts.

- Equip yourself with ways to measure work in progress. Your planning might indicate you’ll reach your goal with plenty of time to spare, but real-world situations often prove to be stubbornly unyielding. If you set daily or weekly benchmarks and then have a system to compare actual progress against predetermined interim goals, you’ll at least avoid being surprised too late to make adjustments.

Create Your Actual Plan for IT

Consider these time-tested tips when planning your stepping stones toward IT:

- **Write things down.** Getting things out of your head and onto paper (or into a computer file or smartphone app) frees your memory for moment-to-moment tasks.

- **Plan to focus** on the ITs that require a lot of mental work at the beginning of the day, when you’re fresh and energetic.

- **Prioritize, prioritize, prioritize.** Prioritizing allows you to devote your brainpower to getting one thing done rather than bouncing from possibility to possibility.

- **Do a double-check on your to-do list.** Starting with your highest priority task, block out on your calendar when you are going to begin it and how long it will take. Continue down your task list, blocking out times for each task.

- **Employ the Four-D strategy.** The Ds are delegate, delete or delay — and one more D: do! More often than we admit, tasks that ought to take only a couple of minutes to complete end up taking much more time when they’ve been put off. In many cases, the most effective way of keeping a molehill from becoming a mountain is simply to finish it while it’s manageable.

- **Create gaps and buffers of time.** Be realistic about what you can accomplish in an hour or in a day. Allow time for the inevitable interruptions and crises. If your schedule is too full, the tendency is to drop the Important Things for the merely urgent ones. Research suggests that tasks typically take 20 percent more time than expected. So if you have a task you think will take an hour, add another 12–15 minutes just in case.

- **Develop a habit or build a routine into your plan.** A routine can walk you through a series of ITs that need to be accomplished on a regular basis. If you give some thought to how best to order tasks, the most logical and productive flow, you can execute a series of tasks almost as if it’s a single task.

If you create a plan to accomplish each IT, your days have the potential to go much more smoothly — and you’re more likely to get your most Important Thing done. You’ll know where your time and energy need to be applied. ●

Doing IT

Failure at an IT is Often Better Than Success at Something Else

A seemingly small number of people have the capacity to get everything done. They’re on top of deadlines, prepared when called upon, and can execute well at a moment’s notice. It would appear as if their funnel doesn’t narrow at the bottom — everything imaginable flows through to completion. They have an amazing ability to make things happen.

You can be such a person.

Conversely, many people have a very narrow outlet at the bottom of their funnel. They may have all sorts of plans, possibilities and ideas but fall short when it comes to executing them ... they simply can’t get IT done.

You can be that person as well.

Focus on IT

To accomplish IT and do IT well requires that every resource you have at your disposal be aligned with IT. Even if IT requires only five minutes to complete, being able to focus your physical, mental, emotional and even financial

Summary: GETTING TO IT!

energy effectively on IT for those few moments can have a major impact on getting IT done.

Remember that IT is your first priority — that's the whole point. Instead of thinking of IT last, reflect on IT first, and schedule the appropriate tasks and activities to achieve IT. That way, you're less likely to run out of time or energy before you get around to IT.

Deep, focused attention to IT is your best hope for completing IT effectively and efficiently instead of leaving IT unfinished and having to return to IT later — turning it into yet another distraction preventing you from making progress on the next IT.

Multitasking may sound like an effective way to work on IT, but don't be tempted. The end result is frequently time and energy wasted in jumping from one item to the next (and back), inhibiting your natural ability to focus intently on getting IT done.

Manage Interruptions While Working on IT

An MIT study found that when employees are interrupted, they lose time and efficiency in two ways: First, the diversion itself takes them away from the task. Second, to get back into the task, they need to warm up their thinking again and refamiliarize themselves with where they left off.

Most interruptions probably do have some connection to your work responsibility or personal values. To better manage your interruptions and minimize their impact, consider the following strategies:

- Review some reasons why other people interrupt you, and address their workflow habits before changing your own. Are the interruptions the result of people lacking information, knowledge or skills that only you possess, a situation that could be easily corrected by documenting and distributing what you know? Are their requests similar? If there's a pattern, what one change would eliminate a host of interruptions?

- Determine whether the interruption is important enough for you to change your current workflow. Will handling this interruption help improve the productivity of other members of your team, allowing you to get more ITs done as well?

- Be less available when you want to focus on IT. Turn off email notifications and send your phone calls directly to voice mail. Physically move out of an environment where you're frequently interrupted.

Measure Your Time on IT — or Not on IT

People who are successful at accomplishing what is most

important don't have to guess where their time is spent. They know. They realize that spending time on the "right work" is key.

A good way to measure where your time is spent (or not spent) is to use a time log for a week or two. It's a simple experiment. Just label the days of the week across the top of a spreadsheet and the time you want to track in 15- or 30-minute increments down the side. Set an alarm for the top of each hour. When the alarm goes off, stop what you're doing, and record in detail what you've accomplished over the past hour — an entry for each 15- or 30-minute segment. We realize this exercise is unnatural and a hassle, but the information you'll be gathering is likely to be very telling.

At the end of the week, review your activities. Total the amount of time you spent in definable categories such as meetings, returning calls, writing email, working on the XYZ report, talking with customers, eating meals, taking breaks, etc. Be honest with yourself — total up the time you feel you've been less than productive. Have your team do the same.

Now, what are you going to do about it? Ask yourself these questions:

- What activities are getting the bulk of my time? Are they IT for me by choice?
- How can I alter what I'm doing so that I'm spending more time on IT?
- What activities can be eliminated to allow more room for IT?

Take Care of Yourself so You Can Take Care of IT

Take care of yourself so that you're in the best condition to accomplish IT. Here are some statistics from the Families and Work Institute:

- *Thirty-two percent of Americans report that their work life has a primarily negative impact on their lives off the job.*
- *Nearly two out of three individuals are overweight or obese.*
- *Nearly half (48 percent) of U.S. employees have not engaged in regular physical exercise in the last 30 days.*
- *One third of the workforce shows signs of clinical depression.*
- *Thirty-nine percent of U.S. employees took fewer vacation days than the number for which they were eligible.*

To keep your body humming along and working at peak performance, keep these suggestions in mind:

- **Set warning signals** that tell you when you're working too hard or putting too much stress on your body.
- **Get enough sleep.** You'll be less able to focus and you'll have less energy during the day if you don't get enough rest. Sleep deprivation is implicated in all kinds of

Summary: GETTING TO IT!

physical maladies, too, from high blood pressure to obesity.

- **Exercise.** Walk, run, bike, do yoga, lift weights, swim, mountain climb ... mix it up! Exercise is vital.
- **Take a break.** You should have bursts or sprints of focus and productivity (no more than 90 minutes at a time), and then take a break.
- **Watch what you eat.** Make sure you have a good breakfast to jumpstart your day and your energy level. Monitor the quality and quantity of your lunch. Keep lunch light and healthy. Consider energy foods throughout the day.
- **Do more of the things you love.** Doing the things you enjoy builds positive-feedback routines and helps you maintain your energy level.
- **Don't get discouraged!** Overcoming self-destructive habits is hard work, but do you really prefer keeping them to making a little effort to form positive habits? ●

After Accomplishing IT

The Journey May Be More Valuable Than the IT Itself

The moment of bringing closure to IT is a good time to take stock of your achievement and what you've learned. There is much to gain from reflection and consideration of what went well and what didn't, which steps were effectively planned, and which were overlooked on the path to accomplishing IT.

While reflecting, consider questions such as these:

- What is the single biggest thing I learned during this process that I can apply to the future?
- What was the source of my greatest struggle?
- What can I do to better prepare myself or my team so that I don't face setbacks next time?
- What was an "aha moment" for me? What did I learn about myself?
- How could I have communicated better and gotten more people "on board"?

If others were involved in IT, get their observations and reflections as well.

Construction contractors make punch lists of all the little things that need to be wrapped up before closing out a project. The items on this list are usually the fine details that really put the finishing touches on the project. As part of your planning, make a punch list and finalize it so you don't have to keep adding trivial afterthoughts that drag out the conclusion of IT. When all items on the list are checked off, have a celebration — and move on. ●

Doing IT Again

Your Next IT Awaits

You know the next Important Thing awaits. Once you've successfully accomplished an IT, you probably have a clearer idea of where you want to go next, and you've equipped yourself with valuable tools to guide you efficiently. You just have to answer, "What's my next IT?"

Before you move too quickly, however, reflect on the possibilities that have been in your funnel for some time, waiting for their chance. Which opportunities can you now move along into your action plan, and which no longer belong?

You might not want to assume that you know what your next Important Thing should be. You might not want to engage in the next action until you've given yourself a chance to review your situation.

Consider giving your attention first to your values, beliefs and priorities filters. Don't put off the opportunity to concentrate on the deeper and richer things in life. You can be constantly busy checking items off your to-do list, or you can spend your time on something that really adds value and meaning to your existence.

To ensure that you are continually aligned with your values and goals, ask yourself some of the following questions:

- What circumstances or conditions are different than they were one year ago? Six months ago? Two weeks ago? The key is to be aware of how possibilities in your funnel may have changed based on these conditions.
- Based on these changing circumstances or conditions, what new goals, opportunities or passions do I need to consider now to determine what IT will be for me?
- Are my daily activities fulfilling my needs?
- Is my focus on a major IT causing me to neglect other areas?
- Am I moving forward, staying the same (getting stale) or moving backward (regressing)? Ask this question as it relates to work, relationships and your personal well-being.

The value of a course correction or adjustment cannot be overstated. In fact, the busier you are, the more important it is to take stock of the conditions around you and see how they affect your choice of IT.

People often jump to the conclusion that an Important Thing has to be a major change or giant project. This doesn't need to be the case. Ask yourself what small adjustments, repeated and amplified over time, might make a big difference in your life or the life of someone near you.

Summary: GETTING TO IT!

You are ultimately the one who decides what you will accomplish and focus on. Whether your next IT is a baby step or a big leap, don't sit back and watch your life go by. Seize the moment, hour, week and year to accomplish what is important to you and those around you. ●

Working with Others on IT

Is Some Part of Your IT also an IT for Them?

Most ITs will require some level of "buy-in" or participation from others. Fail to get other people to change, and the IT you're working on may remain unnecessary, misguided or even threatening in their hearts and minds. And without the participation of others, it might mean that you end up doing all the work yourself. So how do you lead others to and through it? Communication is key.

Encourage Feedback and Ideas on How to Accomplish IT

When individuals are asked for input on how a community lot — a neighborhood vegetable garden, a local park — should be changed, they develop a sense of ownership and engage more fully in making IT successful. Although you may already have the end result in mind, asking questions and synthesizing responses allows others to come to the same conclusion. The process of collectively reaching the same conclusion can be so much more effective than simply telling the team, "Here's the objective and here's how we're going to do it." Working together on the strategies, tactics and outcomes creates buy-in that's crucial to success. You also might be pleasantly surprised as new and even better ideas are brought to the table.

We recommend using the Six S strategy to create an action plan that best accomplishes IT:

1. *Seek* out the strengths of those on your team.
2. *Set* clear expectations. Clearly describe each individual's responsibility, actions that need to be taken, and the desired outcome from those actions.
3. *Search* for opportunities to stretch others.
4. *Schedule* clear deadlines: What is to be completed in what form, by whom, by when?
5. *Synchronize* goals, outcomes and values that will eliminate or at least minimize activities that don't fully contribute to achieving the desired end.
6. *Sustain* a focus on IT — keep the "heat," the sense of urgency, simmering through strong communication and firm accountability.

Closure

When IT is completed, assign final tasks, and formally declare the project complete once they're accomplished. Don't savor your achievements so long that everyone forgets the feeling of being in the throes of a battle with an uncertain outcome; rather, put IT behind, and align everyone to move forward to the next Important Thing. ●

Wrapping IT Up

A Successful Life is a Succession of Successful ITs

Focusing on and achieving your Important Thing is a process ... one that never ends.

Be the one in the meeting who helps the group find clarity on IT. Don't hesitate to seek assistance when you lose your own path toward IT. Set an example for others by the way you strive to achieve IT. Too many of us have been settling for something else rather than the Important Thing for far too long.

Henry David Thoreau offered a powerful and somewhat painful observation: "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation ... and go to the grave with the song still in them." Your sense of defeat or frustration may come from your awareness of a task at work that never got accomplished. You might have felt it during a difficult time in a relationship or when you gave up a private goal or dream. Thoreau intended to remind us that we all have some potential, ability or purpose within us that we may never achieve if we don't set aside desperation and take committed, purposeful action.

What's the song within you waiting to be sung? Your Important Thing is waiting. Get to IT. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Getting to It!* you'll also like:

1. ***The ONE Thing*** by Gary Keller and Jay Papasan. You want more satisfaction from life and more time. In *The ONE Thing*, you will learn how you can have both by cutting through clutter and staying on track.
2. ***No More Pointless Meetings*** by Martin Murphy. Murphy introduces four "Work Sessions" that replace meetings to get more done faster than ever before.
3. ***Springboard*** by G. Richard Shell. *Springboard* will help you reevaluate your future and envision success on your own terms.